

*Extracted from - Federal
Design Manual, Issue No. 12,
November 1992*

Designers have key role in metric conversion

"Metrication will lead to an information explosion," declares an Australian government official whose country has made the change in recent years from conventional measurement to the metric system.

Hans J. Milton, who, as Australia's Assistant Secretary for Housing Research, was heavily involved in that change, made this prediction in a paper urging graphic designers in this country to prepare for the major role they must play in helping Americans understand and accept the metric system.

Milton noted that only the United States and four small Third World countries have not yet made the conversion to the metric system, now an almost universal standard. Since Congress passed the U.S. Metric Act of 1975, however, major changes in the way we determine and express dimensions and capacities are inevitable. In a paper he wrote while on loan from his government to the National Bureau of Standards, Milton said:

"Early awareness of lead times is required to schedule graphics, typesetting, proofing, and printing during the metric change because demands for each of these services is likely to escalate."

With the approach of actual usage in the United States, Milton predicts, there will be increasing demand for three principal types of metric information:

1. *General advisory or instructive material.* This will include basic literature to explain the correct use of the international system of units—the formal term to describe the system that was adopted by a 1960 treaty signed by most major nations.

2. *Detailed metric technical material.* Reference material in metric units for use during the transitional period and after the economy becomes fully metric will include handbooks, codes, standards, specifications, product literature, and price lists. Although in many instances the structure and layout of existing publications may be retained, diagrams, charts, tables, and other graphic material may need to be revised and redesigned.

3. *Visual information and aids.* Metric posters, charts, maps, special aids, and metric identification symbols can facilitate the change to the metric system.

The experiences of designers in Great Britain and Australia contain some pitfalls American designers should try to avoid, Milton says. One common failing is to try to provide too much information so that the visual impact and education value is negated. As an excellent example of a "single impact" poster he cites a design for the British Construction Industry Training Board showing the bottom of a foot. The caption reads: "This is not a foot it's 300 mm." By contrast, an Australian poster describing metric measurement for the real estate industry suffered from what Milton called "visual digestion" by displaying enough

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material for four posters.

Most of the countries that have preceded the United States in the change have established a national metric symbol. Canada, which combines a stylized "M" with the outline of its traditional maple leaf, has issued a manual with explicit instructions for using this symbol. An "M" appears in the center of a map of Australia in that country's symbol. Britain uses a key with an "M" in the blade of the key.

Milton suggested that an annual metric poster competition be held to assist in educational activities during the transitional period. These would be judged for content, visual impact, and accuracy.

He suggested that as one of its first actions, the National Metric Board, which Congress established to coordinate the conversion, initiate a national graphic design competition for development of a U.S. metric symbol. Countries that have preceded the United States in metrication, he said, have found such symbols highly useful for quick identification of metric items and for providing a national theme for the creation of metric awareness.